

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption

Book review for discussion, Albemarle-Charlottesville NAACP meeting,
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Several books have been published recently about social **injustice** in the US legal system. If you only read one, make it Bryan Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. This is a book of contrasts that is compelling in story and in subject. It is an easy read - a book that reads more like a true crime novel or even contemporary American literature. And, it is a difficult read as Stevenson reveals the reality of a systemic bias along economic and racial lines that challenges our ideals of an impartial and objective judicial system.

Stevenson, an African American Harvard educated lawyer, grew up in a poor rural area of the Eastern Shore. He dedicated himself from the beginning to provide representation for the underserved growing in number in our prisons. He begins his thirty-year career with his first position with the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee of Atlanta, GA. Since 1989, he has been the Executive Director of the Equal Justice Institute, EJI, in Montgomery, AL., offering free quality legal services to condemned men and women on death row.

We see the headlines every day for questionable crimes, atrocious crimes, and senseless crimes. We only have the word of the media. We may publicly condemn someone without knowing whom they are, how they relate to their family and community. We don't have the facts but we rely on our justice system to serve the public impartially.

In this book, Stevenson humanizes those who have been dehumanized by the system. He presents individual cases as a story personalizing the individual by describing the circumstances contributing to the alleged or actual crime. He is not defending or condoning their actions but he presents the real person often exposed to prejudicial treatment in court, isolation and abuse in prison, and punishment that exceeds the deed. Through these stories, he illustrates the repercussions of the legal ordeal for the underrepresented.

The running thread that ties the book together is the story of Walter McMillian; accused of murdering a white woman he did not even know. McMillian, a working African-American in Monroeville AL, was rooted in his community through work, family and church. Coerced false witness testimony and weak legal representation landed him with a death sentence. There is the suggestion that he was targeted by law enforcement because he was having an affair with another white woman, which went against local social norms. His story begins with his arrest and placement on Death Row *while awaiting charges* and the following six years he lost to Death Row. Stevenson writes of a person with faults and strengths. Stevenson also discusses the tough issues and hurdles, yet maintaining hope for the true just outcome he desires.

Through these stories, Stevenson presents several topics in our judicial process which require scrutiny and change, such as:

- Treatment of children in the court system and prison
- Inhumane use of solitary confinement for children sentenced to adult prisons
- Use of life imprisonment or death sentence as punishment for non-violent offenses
- Lack of quality legal representation for challenged individuals from extreme poverty, lifetime of abuse, mentally challenged, veterans with PTSD, etc.

Stevenson also asks some hard philosophical and practical questions:

- What effect does mass incarceration have on specific communities and our society as a whole (what price are we paying)?
- What does our broken judicial system say about our culture to the rest of the world?

It is difficult to talk about our justice system in the US and the culture of mass incarceration of the late twentieth century that has grown into a profitable industry. There is an enormous gap between the reality of contemporary judicial processes and the general public's knowledge. Bryan Stevenson has provided a book that is a catalyst for that discussion.